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University of Nevada, Reno

**Desert Flowers: Sexualized Industries of Nevada
and the Women Who Work In Them**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and the Honors Program

By

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We recommend that the thesis
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and the Women Who Work In Them**

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Abstract

The thesis delves into the struggles and working conditions of young women employed in sexualized industries in the state of Nevada, particularly casinos, gentlemen's clubs, and brothels. Through extended research and interviews, this thesis combines true-life narrative from one-on-one interviews with information in the fields of sociology, women's studies, and law. Through interviews of cocktail waitresses, promo models, exotic dancers, and prostitutes, this piece of narrative nonfiction takes a look at the lives of these women. By doing so, it will provide a multitude of perspectives that will illuminate a world that is currently kept in the dark.

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Introduction

I grew up in Las Vegas surrounded by sex. Strip clubs, pornographic pamphlets, adult stores, naked women on billboards, showgirls, and suggestive advertising copy were the norm. Even while being raised in the suburbs by conservative parents, I was not sheltered from the “Crazy Girls” taxi signs, where women with buxom behinds lined up can-can style, 1980s hair frizzing into pompadours in an ad that hadn’t been updated in two decades and was now an iconic piece of Las Vegas propaganda. I remember once going to the mall with my best friend when I was in middle school and browsing a store that sold a variety of inexpensive shoes. It wasn’t until the salesman tried to sell us clear plastic heels with slots for tips that we realized what kind of customer base the store was oriented towards.

I remember when the gigantic ship in front of the Treasure Island casino played host to a swashbuckling skit akin to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* with men shooting off fake canons in high seas battle. Several years ago, a new show called *Sirens of T.I.* took over the location. It was a campy, sexy performance featuring women dressed in what was essentially pirate-themed lingerie and boots. The show featured such poetic dialog as:

“Ahoy, there!”

“Who are you calling *ahoy*?”

I lived in Sin City during a period when it was shifting into a new identity. Its early years had been about glamor and the chokehold of the mob, but the 1980s and 1990s saw the development of family-oriented attractions like the Circus Circus Adventure Dome and the Wet N’ Wild water theme park. But with the birth of Las

Vegas's official "What Happens Here, Stays Here" campaign in 2003 when I was 12, the entire city underwent a rapid change to revert and expand everything into a 21-and-up environment. Whereas the somewhat tacky, themed casinos, like the medieval Excalibur castle and ancient Egypt Luxor pyramid, had once been home to Disneyland-like plaster environments, they were now drawing in adult revue shows and gourmet restaurants. Non-themed casinos, like the Aria and Cosmopolitan of City Center, opened and brought an edgy, sophisticated, and glitzy new line of restaurants, music venues, and shops.

Sex, alcohol, and gambling had always been the vices that Las Vegas promoted, but the city became a caricature of itself and pushed everything to the extreme. If a pool had lifeguards, it had *sexy* lifeguards. If a blackjack table had a dealer, it had a *sexy* dealer. Escort services were openly advertised on billboard trucks that made laps up and down Las Vegas Boulevard. Cocktail waitress uniforms had always been risqué, but now, female bartender uniforms became more daring with exposed skin via plunging necklines, short skirts, and hot pants. As the nightclub scene blossomed, 20-something year old women were hired to attend so that the clientele would believe that the nightclub genuinely attracted beautiful people in droves.

But the hyper and chaotic lifestyle of Las Vegas is not the only draw that the sexualized Silver State has to offer. In the more rural counties of Nevada, brothel prostitution has been available for over a century ever since the state became developed as a result of mining. While the nearest brothel to Clark County—where Las Vegas resides—is a 60 mile drive away to the Chicken Ranch near Pahrump, there are more brothels that are a shorter drive from Nevada's other major metropolitan center, the Reno-Tahoe area. Legal prostitution has always been a highly controversial subject, and

Nevada is currently the only state that allows it. Health code regulations, discussion of pricing, and advertising are all extremely regulated for brothels, far more than strip clubs and other businesses that rely on monetized female sexuality.

While sex(ualized) work is something that has always been a blatant facet of Nevada's culture, I found that I knew very little about how such industries actually operated, especially for the women working within the cloistered walls of casinos, strip clubs, and brothels. The expectation seemed to be that they not only look like models but also bear the emotional and psychological burdens that can come from the labors of a very specialized brand of customer service. I started to have questions: How did they get into the kind of businesses that made their sexuality for sale? What kind of harassment did they receive on the job? What did management expect of them? Did they have boundaries for what they were willing to do? What were the fulfilling aspects of the work? Was the money really good enough to make it worth it?

I decided to look at the sexualized industries of Nevada on a spectrum. At one end, I would be interviewing women who are employed in the more mild lines of work like cocktail waitressing, bartending, and promotional modeling, which are jobs that require high standards of physical attractiveness and good customer relations but that ultimately do not expect customer arousal to come as a result of interactions. In the middle of the spectrum, I would interview women who work as exotic dancers in the state's strip clubs, where physical attractiveness, female companionship, and customer arousal (but not intercourse) are the point of the work. Finally, at the far end of the spectrum, I would be talking to legal prostitutes, sex workers whose entire job is centered

on creating an experience of both companionship and sexual intercourse for brothel customers who pay for the privilege.

While many books, articles, movies, television shows, and essays have been produced about sexualized industries on a worldwide scale, Nevada's corner of the market is still a field that is not well studied or understood. Sexualized commerce is a business that changes frequently from the aspects of the law, to the aesthetic, to the general social attitude, to economic and financial developments. Sociologists, women's rights activists, lawyers, anthropologists, medical professionals, and media have gotten to the fringes—and sometimes further—of studying the diverse world of Nevada's sexualized industries, but it is still a largely shadowy component of the state's economy and history. Given the stigmatized nature of the work, many women are reluctant to risk losing their privacy by talking to journalists. They also fear getting into trouble with the management of their places of work. This reluctance leads to stonewalling, making it very difficult to study sexualized industries in depth.

As a woman who is in the same age group as many of the women who work in these businesses, I was in a unique position to gather information for this thesis; I would be talking to them on their level not from an ivory tower of academia or the hallowed halls of a judgmental religious organization. There was an element of trust that came from my age and gender, and this allowed me to get certain information that might not have been available to journalists and researchers otherwise. I was able to relate the their college classes, their boyfriend troubles, and their difficulty in making ends meet. This common ground, in conjunction with the changing economic and social landscape of Nevada, made the timing for this research propitious. Due to time constraints, this thesis

does not have the depth of comprehension that would have come from a long-term project, but I have endeavored to depict an accurate and thorough cross-section of the emotional, historical, political, legal, psychological, physical, and financial context of sexualized work in Nevada.

This thesis is not meant to be a moral judgment or an argument for or against sexualized industries. In a journalistic fashion, I have made it my objective to present the facts of what I've learned and to let my readers decide their opinions for themselves. The women I spoke to came from a range of backgrounds, and they all had different ambitions, different personal boundaries, and different reasons behind why they do the work that they do. I was connected to most of these women through friends and acquaintances in my own social network, although I did not interview anyone that I already knew. Some of my interviewees were complete strangers outside of my social network who never met me until I walked into their place of work. I journeyed to the strip clubs of Las Vegas and Reno, to a brothel in Mound House, and coffee shops and bars throughout the state to do interviews and tour the industries in question.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I learned many things about myself as well. As someone the same age, gender, and relative attractiveness level as many of the women I interviewed, I realized that if things had gone a little bit differently in my life, I could have been in the exact same position that they were, so I needed to treat my interview subjects as peers and give them the respect they deserved. I needed to get inside their heads and learn as much as possible. In addition, I quickly learned that I needed to be confident enough to walk in anywhere and make myself comfortable, whether I be in the dressing room of a gentleman's club or a prostitute's bedroom. Throughout my

research, I had many friends tell me that they would have been scared to go to some of the places I went and talk to some of the people I talked to. But I loved every minute of it and look to this thesis as one of the most valuable learning experiences of my life.

It is my hope that my enthusiasm for the field of journalism and for the fascinating subject matter is apparent in the chapters that follow. This thesis has been organized into three major sections. The first is dedicated to the more mild forms of sexualized work such as promotional modeling, bartending, and cocktail waitressing; the second section focuses on exotic dancers; and the third and final section is about the most sexualized industry in Nevada: prostitution. At every level of these industries prior to prostitution, the women I interviewed felt increasing pressure to monetize their bodies and their sexuality. These pressures can become easy to succumb to in Nevada, a state where tourists, hotel-casinos, and abundant amounts of cash are all readily accessible and sex is openly a commodity. There is a certain amount of tension that comes with the territory of being willing to market oneself in a blatantly sexualized manner, and while the revenue stream can be formidable, the question becomes: at what cost is that money received?

This thesis will answer that question and many more.

Author's Note on Methodology and Sources

The content of this thesis is based on personal interviews with sources that took place between December 2012 and April 2013. Very few outside sources were referenced in favor of creating original content, although many resources were used to gain prior knowledge about the nature of sexualized industries. These resources included such books and articles as *Casino Women: Courage in Unexpected Places* by Susan Chandler and Jill B. Jones, *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper* by Diablo Cody, *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and Its Women* by Alexa Albert, *Bare: The Naked Truth About Stripping* by Elisabeth Eaves, and "'Who's Got The Look?' Emotional, Aesthetic And Sexualized Labour In Interactive Services" by Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson. A full list of these helpful resources is available at the end of this thesis.

For professional reasons and because social stigma still exists around most sexualized work, many names—including stage names--have been changed to protect the identities of the women who were interviewed.

“Las Vegas looks the way you'd imagine heaven must look at night.”

-Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*

Contracts and Fantasies

While Las Vegas has always been known as a city full of glamor, where beautiful women flock to work on casino floors, at nightclubs, and in elaborate stage shows, it has also become a growing hotspot for recruiting modeling talent. Even jobs that have little to do with runways or photo shoots have begun to advertise for modeling talent. From casino pool lifeguards to restaurant hostesses, a quick perusal of the Las Vegas Craigslist want ads reveal such job titles as “model waitress” or “model promotional saleswoman.” To apply for such jobs, employers request headshots and body measurements along with résumés, and modeling stipulations are written into contracts so as to maintain a standard by which a particular employee is to be judged. If she violates this standard via weight gain or aging, she can be subject to firing by management.

It’s a long standing example of employment discrimination, but Las Vegas has always found ways to create exceptions to a rule. As a city that sells sex and debauchery at every turn, most local courts won’t challenge the encroachments on Title VII gender equality laws that occur on a regular basis, especially in the casinos. There is an unspoken understanding that the Strip is selling a fantasy, and that experience is the city’s mainstay.

According to Professor Ann McGinley, an employment discrimination expert at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' Sam Boyd School of Law, the current standard for hiring practices in Las Vegas is that "selling sex is ok, but selling sexual appeal is not ok."

To explain this more thoroughly, McGinley cites the Bona Fide Occupational Qualification criterion. The BFOQ says that any discrimination that occurs must be

necessitated by the nature of the job. For example, gentlemen's clubs and nightclubs that revolve around a certain depiction of their employees (such as the female bunnies of Playboy clubs) warrant a particular leniency in their hiring practices because of the nature of their business. On the flip side, selling sexual appeal has been more readily scrutinized by the law. Ever since stewardesses starting fighting national airlines in the 1970s for the right to be hired outside of sexual appeal stipulations, many American businesses heralded an era of equality with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. At the time, however, people may have used similar reasoning that much of Las Vegas uses now: if eye candy is what the customer wants, then why is there a problem with only hiring attractive people?

"The law has always said that customer preference is not a defense," said McGinley.

But generalized customer preference seems to be the standard by which women are hired in Las Vegas and what kind of look they are striving to achieve. Bare skin seems to be the standard when it comes to midriffs, cleavage, and legs, on top of makeup, hair, and weight requirements.

While these trends are most prevalent in Las Vegas, in many ways, Reno has caught the "sexy" fever when it comes to the casino service industry. All across Nevada, from the models and cocktail waitresses of Sin City to the bartenders of The Biggest Little City, a standard of sexuality has become the norm. What follows in this section are interviews with women who live these norms.

A Model Citizen

It was the night when Natalie had the most amazing booking of her career. The job paid \$200 to go to a dinner that was being held at a popular nightclub in honor of the birthday of a Taiwanese high roller. She was told to wear red and had to sign a confidentiality agreement to never reveal the guest's name. When she and the 50 other "mix and mingle" models arrived, they had to turn in their cameras at the door, so the thrilling details of what happened next are only preserved in her memory. She and the other models entered a grand entrance hall elaborately embellished with drapery and a completely open central bar. As the models talked with guests, the ceiling opened, and women dressed as Cirque du Soleil champagne fairies descended into the crowd. Caviar with gold flakes was served, and the models were allowed to eat as much as they wanted.

As the high roller's guests arrived, Natalie saw high profile celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio, *Mad Men*'s Jon Hamm, and NBA athletes enter the room. Performers wearing traditional Chinese dancing dragon costumes came in to signal to the crowd that they were to move into the next room. Once inside, they saw a jaw-dropping image of the lost city of Machu Picchu recreated on an IMAX screen, filling the wall from floor to ceiling. The event began with Jamie Foxx hosting on a microphone. All guests were presented with dinners of Kobe beef and lobster, and they were given expensive cigars to smoke once they were done eating. The New York ballet performed a rendition of "Adam and Eve," and performers dressed as ninjas shot arrows from their feet. Ke\$ha and Puff Daddy each did a show for the crowd. Then, a DJ turned the whole event into a nightclub, and the guests danced early into the morning. The event cost \$2 million and had been put together in three days.

“Vegas is excess to the max,” said Natalie, thinking back on the experience.

Now 30 years old, Natalie Haddad reflects back on the earliest parts of her career, when she had been a model based out of Las Vegas for seven years. Fresh out of high school and studying business with an emphasis in broadcast journalism at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, she began to model at the age of 19. Her skill set ranged from editorial photography to sexy promotional events to “mix and mingle” gigs. In a typical day, she made around \$400, or \$75 per hour. At her peak, she often made \$100-240 per hour. She flew around the world working for various companies, and she wound up modeling for such companies as Wells Fargo, the Bellagio casino, Porsche, IS vodka, Skyy vodka, the STK restaurant at the Cosmopolitan casino, ESPN, Tao nightclub, the Scream Awards, Tyco, Wrangler, and others. She spent this time learning about different products and businesses, and from her promotional modeling work, she learned how to do a sales pitch in 30 seconds flat.

She was the face of CineVegas, a Las Vegas film festival that ran from 1998-2009, and she was the model for the famous Tao nightclub billboard on the Las Vegas Strip, which featured her bare back with a line of Asian characters done in inky calligraphy. She was also featured in an advertisement for STK, a steakhouse at the Cosmopolitan casino and resort, which was the newest and most fashionable spot on the Strip at the time.

As Natalie got more deeply involved in the world of modeling, she began to create an identity for herself. She decided to go by the stage name Natalie Summerlin, paying homage to the affluent area of Las Vegas where she grew up. She began to understand how the business worked on a national scale. She learned that Los Angeles is

a largely commercial modeling town that wants bronze bikini bodies and mass appeal. Chicago focuses on a natural look and does mostly catalog work. New York draws high fashion models with alien-like features and waif-like bodies. Las Vegas, on the other hand, is known for its promotional business and publishes advertising with women who have big hair, big breasts (90 percent of which are fake, Natalie estimated), are very tan, and could be considered an object lesson of sex appeal. While working in Las Vegas, Natalie stuffed nylons in her bra and daubed bronzer in her cleavage to create the illusion of going from a small B to a D cup for photos and events.

Working as a promotional model helped Natalie overcome her inhibitions. In high school, she was, in her words, a “shy Goth girl,” and once she started modeling, she was forced to interact with people constantly. Whether they are working a table at a convention or wearing lingerie at a nightclub, promo models have to hustle to get booked. They must be at once cordial, conversational, and professional. Natalie saw many girls who would drink too much at work, and, as a result of their amateur behavior, there was a lot of turnover in the business. For some girls who couldn’t cut it as models, the work was an easy segue into escorting. Or, when a girl didn’t have an alternate plan for her life, she pursued the same industry until she couldn’t do it anymore (or, as Natalie put it, “work until the phone stops ringing”), or she tried to marry rich while she was still young and attractive. Unfortunately, Natalie observed that many of these women were replaced by their husbands anyway and were forced into low paying service industry jobs once their looks left them. Depending on the rigor of their beauty regimen, some models can keep making money on their looks into their late thirties or even early forties, but most quit the industry by about 35 years old.

For Natalie, there was a wide variety of modeling jobs to be involved in. From editorial to convention work to runway to product promotions, she got a taste of everything. A subset of promotional work known as “mix and mingle” involves being hired to provide eye candy for guests who come to a particular business or event. Nightclubs in Las Vegas are particularly adept at hiring mix and mingle models, as they make the nightclub seem particularly popular with attractive people when photos are taken within the club.

Nightclub model pay is largely under the table, however, and this has led to some legal difficulties in the past for Las Vegas businesses. PURE nightclub at the Caesars Palace was raided by the Internal Revenue Service back in 2008 for problems related to tax evasion and tip pooling amongst club employees and management. When the subject of payment for the models became an issue for tax reasons, the IRS became suspicious. Because the IRS didn't understand the atmosphere of mix and mingle modeling, it believed that such work was a front for escorting.

In other instances, the IRS wouldn't exactly be off base. Many of the attractive women who work in the Las Vegas modeling industry are propositioned on a regular basis by the clients and customers of whatever they are promoting. Many of the models don't think to set clearly defined boundaries for themselves and what they are willing to do for their careers. They wind up going home with men, thinking that doing so is professionally required of them. In a business where they regularly interact with the rich and famous, many models don't know where to draw the line. Some even end up becoming “professional girlfriends,” mistresses to celebrities and the powerful movers and shakers of the business world. Natalie knew girls who dated A-list celebrities and

athletes, only to be dumped in a few years. She briefly worked as a promotional model with one of the Tiger Woods' mistresses, who, after he refused to pay for more of her expenses, decided to sell her story to the gossip rags as soon as she found out he had had other mistresses besides herself. Natalie also knew a woman who dated George Clooney for many years and even quit her job to move with him to Italy. After some time, Clooney broke up with her because his original reason for being attracted to her--her ambitions and career goals--had disappeared over the time they were together. The woman, heartbroken, moved back to Las Vegas to return to her old industry: cocktail waitressing. She couldn't believe that after she had been willing to give up her career for a man that it would be the reason for their breakup.

Natalie, on the other hand, has always set clearly defined personal boundaries for herself when it comes to her career. She remembers one terrifying and humiliating experience in her early twenties when she and a few other models were hired for a mix and mingle event. They thought it would be a standard business party and that they would be there to socialize and provide some attractive ornamentation for the customers to enjoy. It turned out that she and the other girls found themselves the center of attention at a huge bachelor party. Approximately 100 men surrounded them, and they were like ravenous wolves: aggressive and hungry for flesh. They smacked the girls on their butts as the girls walked past, and they were clearly looking to be entertained sexually. When the girls told them no, they grew visibly angry.

“We paid to have you here. What is this shit?” they said.

It was at that point that Natalie stormed out and called her agent. She told him the situation: the men thought they were prostitutes, and she refused to stay. She was still paid for the booking, but even now, thinking about the experience unnerves her.

Thankfully, this was a one-time experience for Natalie, and for the most part, the good bookings far outweighed the bad ones. Her career blossomed over her seven years of modeling, and she was able to make some important connections. On one occasion, she got to work with Nigel Barker, a famous British photographer who is well known for his time working on the television show *America's Next Top Model*. For a brief stint, she worked in the ESPN gifting suites, which were large rooms dedicated to promotional product giveaways to celebrities and athletes at sporting events. She toured the celebrities through the rooms, where they could pick out any items they wanted for free. Leftover products were sometimes given to the models who worked the events. On another fun occasion, she broke into acting and had a bit part as a drug-addict-turned-prostitute on *CSI*. During the point when she received the greatest number of bookings in her modeling career, she worked double promotional shifts and made \$150,000 a year. Other years were leaner, and she would make somewhere between \$40,000 and \$80,000. The revenue stream was unpredictable.

There were other negative aspects of the work as well. She had to quickly develop a thick skin and look at modeling as a job and not as something personal. She was told everything about her looks, that she was “too white,” “not white enough,” “too exotic looking,” “not exotic enough,” “too skinny,” or “too fat.” She saw the physical preferences as marketing and didn't get discouraged. When she quit working as a model years later, however, she was amazed by how much relief she felt. She had always had

problems with acne, and being caked in makeup on a regular basis didn't help. In addition, every few weeks, she had to pay for facials to clear up her skin and massages to keep her body limber after long days of posing in high heels. At 30 years old, unlike most girls in the Vegas modeling industry, Natalie hasn't had any plastic surgery work done. She thinks that girls should give themselves a chance to age gracefully before doing anything surgically artificial to their bodies.

Although she had many adventures in modeling, her personal life suffered. With her overwhelming schedule that had her working long hours and occasionally traveling across the country, she abandoned hope for the possibility of being with someone long term. She once dated a guy with what she called "a rock star personality" and all the hang-ups that went along with it. Another time, she discovered that, after several months together, one of the men she dated was actually married with four kids. Her hectic jet-setting schedule made it easy for the men she was with to fool around either with her or behind her back. She also saw many of her coworkers get stuck in relationships where they gave over all of their money to the men they were with, and Natalie couldn't abide by that mentality.

"It was hard for me to find a guy who respected me," said Natalie. "I also didn't want to support anyone."

Throughout the promo work, men harassed her on a regular basis and treated her as if she was one of the products she was selling. As she progressed through her twenties, it bothered her more and more. She wanted to be looked at for her mind. As she got older and more experienced in the world of modeling, her focus became different. Now, wearing lingerie or a bikini made her feel like she had failed.

“Sometimes I’ll look through old tear sheet photos and think, ‘I can’t believe I wore that in public,’” she said.

She also felt that the work was cutthroat amongst the women she worked with, and after seven years, she realized that she had maybe three true friends from the industry. She knew it was time to try new experiences.

After slowing down her career in the modeling industry, she transitioned into working in another field that she was passionate about: music. She moved to Los Angeles to work for the William Morris Endeavor (WME) talent agency to book and sign musicians with producers while still doing some modeling on the side. WME was an entirely different environment from what she was used to. It was more understated and traditional, and Natalie found that her colleagues respected her less if she came to work all “done up.” To make an analogy, before, she had to come to work as a caramel frappuccino with whipped cream and sprinkles, and now, she had to come to work as black coffee with a packet of sugar. She wore very little makeup and put her hair in a topknot every day, and she wore flat shoes and simple clothing. She had to speak directly and clearly to the men she worked with, and she couldn’t use the flirty banter she had become accustomed to when selling products at conventions. It was an invaluable experience, but it was during this time that she decided she wanted to follow another dream she had had for a long time: to start her own business venture. She moved back to Las Vegas to try to realize her aspirations.

Natalie now works with her sister Noelle building a modeling agency business called The N Group, or TNG for short. Even though they are currently based out of an apartment that they rent specifically for their business, Natalie’s next big goal is to get a

storefront. Her agency books men and women as impersonators, spokesmodels, product demonstrators for conventions, showgirls, specialty talent, alcohol promotional models, and swimsuit models, and TNG is expanding to cover other needs as well.

“Las Vegas is very ‘wild west,’ and you can easily book yourself,” said Natalie, “But you have to make sure you’re getting everything you deserve to be paid. For example, if you shoot one commercial or take pictures for a client, you can be paid more depending on how many periods of time it runs. I was once paid \$6,000 for a three-year running \$2,000 job.”

She hopes that The N Group will provide a valuable service to Las Vegas based models by assuring they don’t get taken advantage of either in business dealings or client-model relations. Looking back on her own experience as a promotional model in Las Vegas, she admits that there were many shady aspects of the business. In a city where sex and advertising are inextricably linked, the lines between legitimate modeling work and sex work tend to be easily blurred. The levels of harassment, entitlement, objectification, and inappropriate behavior that occur on a regular basis in the industry are staggering. Luckily for Natalie, she was able to have a fulfilling and lucrative career that spawned a new endeavor that now allows her to foster the career development of other girls who are entering the competitive market she once flourished in.

Stories on the Rocks

At 21 years old, Leah Gallagher applied to work as a cocktail waitress at the Bonanza Casino in Reno. As a beautiful blonde with stunning blue-green eyes, it wasn't hard for her to get the job in the industry. Even after she switched to bartending at the local Pinup Pub bar, she found her looks and gender to be a major asset to her hireability.

It took her a few more service industry jobs plus a period as an office employee for Leah to settle on becoming a bartender at the Eldorado Casino, where she has now been for a few years. Bartending is traditionally a man's job in the fast paced casino tourism business, but many casinos in Nevada have made the switch to hiring women to tend bar because women attract more male customers, who, in turn, are likely to spend more money. Leah found it incredibly easy to get a job and has noticed the trend definitely leaning more towards beautiful young women not only being the cocktail waitresses at the casino but also mixing the drinks.

Leah works at several bars in the Eldorado including the young and hip Centro bar, the Stadium bar that is by the sports book, and the Tivoli restaurant bar. Her hope is to start working at the Brew Brothers nightclub soon, where a high influx of customers earns many of the swing shift bartenders close to \$1,100 per week. As it stands, Leah makes around \$800 per week, far more than she would ever be able to make anywhere else at her current age and with her current skill set.

“There's nothing else I could be doing right now that could make this much except stripping, but I don't want to go that far,” said Leah.

It would seem that most of the women Leah works with know this too. They are almost all in their twenties and early thirties. She knows one woman who serves drinks at

the Eldorado who gets “shoved in the closet” because she is significantly older than the other female bartenders and cocktail waitresses. This woman is always somewhat mean, although Leah doesn’t know if it’s her personality or if it’s because she feels jaded by her status at work. Women who are older than 35 years old have to keep an edge by working much harder than the girls who are a decade their junior as well as by maintaining their physical appearance to the best of their ability.

Even for the younger women who work as cocktail waitresses and bartenders, the appearance standards are high. The management told Leah that she should always come in to work looking her best with a full face of makeup.

“They told me to look every day how I would as if I were going to a wedding,” said Leah.

The “wedding look” analogy only seems to stretch as far as the makeup, however; the uniform for women includes a low-cut black top and black bottoms. Leah typically wears a black bustier, black shorts, and boots. The bustier used to be the required top, but management has been getting more relaxed about what bartenders wear for their tops, as long as the tops are sexy.

“It’s worst when it’s winter because it gets so cold,” said Leah. “I can’t even wear a bolero over a bustier. I’ve tried to wear a black sweater over my uniform before, but my manager told me to take it off. The guys get to wear pants, a long sleeve tuxedo top, and a vest, so they get to be warmer than us in the winter.”

Leah has mixed feelings about the gender discrimination that occurs in the workplace. On one hand, she admits that being an attractive young woman was the primary reason she was chosen for the job over a man, and she found that she didn’t have

to prove her skills like the men did in the hiring process. But she has learned that customers and management treat her differently from her fellow male bartenders. For example, high rollers at casinos tend to be the most presumptuous and aggressively perverted customers, in Leah's experience. Because high rollers are central to a casino's microeconomic structure, they are treated like royalty and get away with nearly anything they want. One particular man who is a regular customer of the Eldorado will often tell Leah to turn around and bend over while she's at work to pick up supplies from the lower shelves, and the predominantly male management will often validate the behavior by chiming in with a "Yeah, girl, shake it!"

"A lot of guys will assume you will go to their room with them, too," said Leah.

And some girls do, as long as they get something out of it from the customer.

There doesn't seem to be discouragement from the management about this kind of quasi-prostitution that occurs on a regular basis within their casino.

"If a high roller can't get what they want at the Eldorado then they'll just go to another casino where they can get everything else plus women, and that means a lot of money being lost to us."

The Grand Sierra Resort in Reno is the only hotel Leah has heard of where employees—particularly female ones—aren't allowed to go into the hotel rooms of the casino without express permission from the management, ostensibly to curb behavior that is essentially illegal.

There's a high roller from the bay area who comes to the Eldorado every other weekend to gamble, and he often takes a seat at the bar when Leah is working. Based on

a conversation they once had, she's fairly certain he's a pimp. He told her that he would pay her \$1,000 if she went on a dinner date with a guy he knew. Leah told him no.

Other high rollers aren't nearly as audacious, however. One man who frequents the Eldorado is exceptionally generous and kind. He is an older man who always asks the cocktail waitresses and female bartenders of the Eldorado about their lives, whether they are eating enough, how their families are, and other pleasantries. Because so many of his meals are comped, he often invites the female employees to dine with him so that he has some company, but he never propositions the women beyond that.

"I think he's just lonely," said Leah. "The management will act suspicious if they see too many of us with him, but he never asks us up to his hotel room. He just buys us dinner or sometimes gives us presents."

For other high rollers, presents come with a price. She has heard several stories of high rollers offering girls vacation trips out of the city to places like Los Angeles, all expenses paid. One girl that Leah knows took a guy up on the offer of going to Hawaii.

"He ended up being a total psycho, and she had to buy her own ticket back to Reno because he canceled the one he bought her."

Leah also occasionally works as a go-go dancer and promotional model on the side to make extra money. In the summer of 2012, she worked both jobs as well as her bartending job. The promotional modeling job involved spending time in a bikini by the Sands casino pool pouring shots for the alcohol company she was working for. As a go-go dancer, she worked at the Grand Sierra Resort. While employed as a dancer, she and her fellow go-go girls kept up the physical standards that were required of them. She

remembers on one occasion, however, when one of the girls talked about eating Jack in the Box for dinner the previous night. Their agent, who was standing nearby, cut in,

“Dancers don’t eat fast food.”

Modeling and go-go dancing tend to have stricter rules about weight gain, but Leah has also heard of strange discriminations happening in the casino service industry. One woman she knew was one of the most efficient cocktail waitresses in the Eldorado and had been promoted to working most of her shifts in “the pit:” the area of a casino’s main floor where table games like blackjack and roulette are played. It’s a prestigious position for a cocktail waitress because it tends to garner the biggest tips. This woman became pregnant and left work for a while to take care of her baby. When she returned to work, she had to start from the bottom rung with undesirable shifts in a different area of the casino. She had lost seniority because of her absence and, unofficially, because of her weight gain from the baby. Leah has never heard of anyone suing for these kinds of discriminations, however. It seems to come with the territory of the job, and a lot of the cocktail waitresses and bartenders have families to support.

Leah estimates that approximately half of the cocktail waitresses where she works are former strippers, although most of them stripped for only about three to six months, just enough time to make some fast money. Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the women Leah works with have breast implants, although Leah herself does not and does not have any plans to get them. Out of the six female bartenders she closely works with, she’s the only one who hasn’t had a boob job. When one of her friends got her breast implants done, this woman flashed anyone who wanted to see them. If she was on shift and a coworker wanted to see, she would showed them in a storage closet. If she was off

shift, she would flash the people at the bar. She enjoyed the attention, and a flirty personality plus large breasts equals some pretty nice tip money.

Working as a bartender without faux assets, Leah has learned to calculate how to get the best tips from her male customers. Oftentimes, it's just by flirting with the customer. If the customer asks her what time she gets off work, she'll say a time much later in the night than when she actually leaves so that the man will get discouraged and leave early. She's figured out that flat-out turning down a man leads to a lost customer and, therefore, lost tips. If a man can be strung along buying drinks until he loses interest, then a healthy amount of cash still goes into her pocket. Some men are too persistent, however, and that's when many of the girls take action.

"Some girls will buy fake rings to stop getting hit on. But then again, some will take off their rings to get tipped more," said Leah.

Sometime stalking becomes an issue if a customer or an ex-boyfriend becomes infatuated with a female employee.

"Security is our best friend."

Leah is very adamant about not crossing her own personal boundaries for money. There was one night that a customer was sitting at her bar a long time, racking up at least \$100 in drinks. Leah was expecting a nice tip as a result of her good service and the sheer percentage of the bill.

"Hey, show me your stomach," the man said.

"What? No, I'm not going to do that."

"Come on, show it to me! I'm not going to tip you unless you show me your belly button."

Considering what he could have asked her to show him, Leah admits that the situation wasn't as bad as it could have been, but Leah was offended and adamant in turning down his request. When her coworker, a male bartender, arrived to work with her, she told him the situation. He shrugged.

“Well, if you don't want to do it, don't do it.”

She was amazed that he wasn't as offended as she was. Today, Leah can't remember if the man ever ended up leaving a tip, but she definitely remembers the way he made her feel.

Typically, if a customer becomes an issue, management tells the bartenders and cocktail waitresses to cut him off. But most of the time the employees handles the issue themselves with the threat of doing so.

Based on other evidence, it's not entirely surprising that a customer believed he could get away with asking for somewhat sexual special treatment. Not all girls who work as cocktail waitresses and bartenders are willing to use their sexuality to get what they want, but the ones who are will do it a lot.

“Sometimes they're called ‘cocktail mattresses,’” said Leah. “The way it works is that you sleep with customers to get money, but you sleep with managers to get shifts.”

There is a lot of tension between girls who each want to get an open swing shift position, especially at the club bars in the Eldorado Casino like Bubinga and Brew Brothers. One bartending friend of Leah's, although she's a very nice person, is a horrible bartender.

“She doesn't know how to mix a Kamikaze shot. That's like a chef not knowing how to make rice.”

But this woman always seems to get good shifts. When Leah asked her about this phenomenon, the woman told her a potboiling tale of corruption that is not verifiable beyond her words. Allegedly, the woman was having a fling with one of the executives high up the Eldorado food chain. One night after work, they went to the Wild Orchid strip club together-- apparently a popular spot for many service industry workers to blow off steam. While there, he paid one of the strippers to perform oral sex on her in a private room while he watched. According to her, this is why she always gets special treatment within the casino when it comes to scheduling.

Not all stories of fraternization are quite as intense, but even so, relations between management and employees seem to have no rules. Using sex to get what one wants is fairly commonplace, although Leah prefers to follow a different path.

She is currently working towards finishing up school at the University of Nevada, Reno with a December 2013 graduation. She wants to travel around Europe for a while once she's done and then figure out where to go from there. Much of her family resides in the South, and she may end up moving there if she can find work in her field of study even though it will mean taking a pay cut from the kind of money she is making in bartending. The way it is right now, the money is excellent and the Eldorado Casino has a tip compliance agreement where she is expected to pay a certain amount of tips per hour when in reality she and her coworkers only report about half of the tips they earn. She sees her skills in bartending as a beneficial fallback in case she needs extra money in the future, especially since this is the only time she will have an advantage over men when it comes to being hired. One thing she fears, however, is being forced into antisocial work.

“I once had an office job and I couldn’t stand it. Bartending is so much fun. I get to hang out and make friends with customers. For my birthday this year, I had to work, but my friends met me at my bar and I got to serve them. I wasn’t allowed to drink, but it still felt like a party because my friends were having fun with me and I got to drink when I got off shift.”

Even though she finds the work generally enjoyable, Leah hopes to leave the industry behind her in the near future in pursuit of a career.

Ink and Drinks

With her long black hair, ear gages, and tattoos, Samantha Blanche stands out. A friend of Leah's, she's a 23-year-old graduate communications student who teaches at and attends UNLV. Although she is an academic who's focused on her master's degree and is set to graduate in the spring of 2014, she was once an employee of the Hard Rock Casino pool and Rehab nightclub, a place notorious for its outlandish and wild parties.

She started working at the pool as a food server when she was 16 years old and remained there until she was 22. When she turned 21, she decided to move from serving food to serving drinks, and after she got some experience doing that, she spent the last part of her service industry career mixing drinks as a bartender instead of serving them. With the intense heat of Las Vegas spring, summer, and fall, she was able to work a long pool season that lasted eight months of the year and then take a four-month-long furlough, during which time she could focus on final exams and family holidays in winter. In a city where the temperature can get past 120 degrees Fahrenheit during the hottest part of the day and tourism means fresh rounds of drunken visitors by the thousands, the break was also a much-needed time for recovery from the pressures of the job.

Generally speaking, Samantha thought the work environment was stressful but fun. Everyone who came to the Hard Rock pool and the nightclub was looking to have a good time, and although alcohol was a key ingredient for fun, people were well behaved most of the time. When it came to serving the customers who partied hard, however, Samantha noticed a lot of drug and alcohol abuse. Even when she was a 16 year old, she would bring food out to the cabanas by the pool and see people smoking weed and

snorting cocaine behind the fabric walls. Over the five years she worked at the Hard Rock, customers offered her ecstasy pills and other narcotics often. She politely turned them down by telling them that she wasn't into drugs, and the customers would know not to ask again. If the drugs became an issue, she would alert security to take care of the problem.

“Managers were very laissez-faire until something was brought to their attention. They were pretty chill because they have a lot of employees and a lot of customers, and it's hard to keep an eye on everyone,” Samantha said.

When it came to alcohol, the general policy was that cocktail waitresses were not supposed to drink on the job, not only because it was considered unprofessional but also because it was extremely dehydrating. If a customer had something expensive like a bottle of Cristal champagne, however, and was very insistent on a female employee sharing a drink with him or her, then they were allowed to have a glass or two. Sometimes customers would become rambunctious and belligerent as a result of drinking under the hot sun, or they would become overtly sexual in a public setting. There were many occasions where couples had to be kicked out for having sex in the pool, and being groped by male customers was a daily occurrence.

The party vibe was heightened even more by some of the clientele. The pool and nightclub had frequent guest celebrities who would host the casino's parties, including R&B stars Rhianna and Chris Brown as well as rock singers like the Foo Fighters. She waited on these and other famous people, and occasionally got to hang out with them while she was on shift, which was definitely a highlight of her time at the Hard Rock.

Working conditions could also be very difficult physically. The uniform for the pool was a bikini, a sheer sarong, and tennis shoes. The waitresses always had to have makeup on, and their hair always had to be well kempt. Another rule was that the girls had to maintain a good figure; it was a rule that the male bartenders and busboys didn't have to abide by.

“Although to be honest, I don't know if there are any men who would want the job of cocktailing. It depends. We once had a male server on the casino floor inside, but none at the pool,” said Samantha.

Management would sometimes tell a girl that she needed to lose weight, but most of the time it was an unspoken agreement that was followed by a majority of the female staff. Samantha never heard of a girl getting fired for weight gain, but there was still a frequent turnover for other reasons.

“Girls would quit because of heat, stress, harassment, and long hours, but a lot of them were also dumb and would get fired for mistakes, like not running a customer's credit card before they bought thousands of dollars worth of food and drinks. The waitresses who had been there a long time would stay there because they knew how the job worked and could hack it.”

Samantha was a model on the side, so she never had to worry about her figure, but she was lucky to have a job at the Hard Rock where they appreciated her “alternative” look; most pools probably would not have accepted a girl with many tattoos and unconventional piercings, but the Hard Rock was all about unorthodox style. A unique look didn't keep certain customers from harassing her on a daily basis, however.

“When you walk around in your bikini taking drink orders, it’s just eyes on eyes on eyes,” said Samantha. “Sometimes the customers get really drunk and stupid and try to grab you or undo your top. But you get to know the security well, so all you have to do is pull the drunk guy over, and security kicks him out...when customers get drunk, they think they can do anything, but that’s Vegas for you in any nightclub.”

Some of the persistent customers were rewarded for their efforts, especially if they were willing to pay all of the expenses when they asked the cocktail waitresses out. Samantha wasn’t one to go out with customers, although she was asked frequently. For three years of her time in the service industry she had a long-term boyfriend.

“Sometimes he would make comments about guys asking me out, but guys who live here know how the Vegas industry is,” said Samantha.

As a model, Samantha started off posing for friends in high school who were honing their photography skills. Then, people started messaging her and offering “trade” (non-cash payments like meal vouchers or clothing) to take pictures, and those pictures became a part of her portfolio. From there, she started to do pinup and event modeling. Eventually she landed a position as an alcohol promo model and editorial model for Sailor Jerry liquor, and it’s a position that she still occasionally fills today.

She recognized early on, however, that modeling, cocktail waitressing, and bartending were very short-term means to her educational goals. The money was fantastic, and she made anywhere between \$200 and \$2,000 per week depending on the number of tourists who were going to be in town and the weather, and it was a great opportunity for a woman in her late teens and early twenties. She never thought about working in a more sexualized industry (like stripping) because the money was so good

where she was. Unlike in Reno, Samantha doesn't think there is very much crossover between casino cocktailing and exotic dancing because there are so many avenues for sexy and beautiful women to exhaust before moving on to a different industry. Although, Samantha admitted, there was a former porn star who worked at the Hard Rock with her.

After she graduates in 2014, Samantha plans to move out of Nevada for her Ph.D. in communication studies, possibly to Seattle, San Diego, or Santa Barbara. Her area of study mostly centers on interpersonal communications although she also deals with some rhetorical analysis. She focuses on studying publicly available data like blogs, public forums, and the media and analyzes the language and technology used in those platforms. The service industry was somewhat useful in her communications studies. Not only did the significant amount of money she earned help her through school (Samantha thinks that the money probably paralleled some entry-level degree jobs), it also groomed her to deal with, talk with, and communicate with a diverse group of people. She sees her time serving drinks as a valuable period of time that helped her earn great money for her age, but she doesn't intend to return. She can only keep moving forward.

"Stripping--in competition with acting and espionage--is the ultimate job for someone whose instinct is to present different façades of who she might be. There is nothing more illusory than a woman pretending to be a sexual fantasy for money."

-Elisabeth Eaves, *Bare: The Naked Truth About Stripping*

Make It Rain

Exotic dancers have long held a special place in popular culture as the “Other,” the fallen woman who becomes implicated in crime, drugs, and sex, or, at the very least, romantic entanglements that are incompatible with her job. One can look to the Bada Bing strip club in *The Sopranos*, Natalie Portman in *Closer*, The Lusty Leopard club in *How I Met Your Mother*, Marisa Tomei in *The Wrestler*, and dozens of other movies, songs, and books to see a common trend of portrayal. The stereotype of the stripper is at once true and two-dimensional. While drug addiction and supporting baby-daddies seem to be legitimate occurrences, there are also many women who strip for empowerment and self-sustainability.

The aesthetic of the stripper has been commandeered as fashion for all types. One only needs to see Britney Spears’ attire in her music video “I’m a Slave 4 U” to see the influence of Salma Hayek’s sexy snake charmer in Quentin Tarantino’s *From Dusk Till Dawn*. ” Thong underwear was worn primarily by porn stars and strippers until Victoria’s Secret made it fashionable for women everywhere in the mid-1990s. Pole acrobatics and strip tease aerobics are becoming exercise staples in specialty gyms. Breast implants have steadily worked their way into mainstream America through many female-dominated service industries, but strippers have led the way in exaggerated feminine characteristics. And yet, to tell a woman she looks or acts like a stripper is a deep-cutting insult. The word has a spot on the shelf next to “slut,” “whore,” “skank,” and “hooker” as a derogatory term meant to imply sexual promiscuity and the moral judgment thereof.

What I found from interviewing strippers across the state of Nevada was a more diverse group of women than I could have imagined. I met one woman who referred to

herself as an “erotic ballerina” and admitted to a couple of occasions where she met up with a customer after work to exchange sex for money. I met many women who were just trying to make ends meet and decided that stripping was the most efficient way of meeting their goals. There were women who had to drink and do drugs to get through a work shift, and there were others who went about their job completely sober. There were many who were disillusioned by men as a result of the work, but there were also some who were in committed relationships. Overall, I found that while the work of stripping could be considered generalize-able, the women themselves were not.

Stripped on the Strip

When I called Amy Castro for a phone interview, she answered and spoke to me from the cold outdoors of her Chicago university. We had been put in touch by a mutual friend, someone she had known from high school and whom I had known from college. She chain smoked her way through the story of how she had spent the last three and a half years stripping from the clubs of Las Vegas to the heart of Chi-town. Having recently quit the profession in August 2012 and become engaged to be married, all while attending school, Amy's perspective on the sex industry was at once academic and anecdotal.

Amy became an exotic dancer in 2009, at the tail end of her high school career. Las Vegas has a remarkably high homeless count for minors, and she became a part of that total when family troubles started brewing. Without stability in her own home, she essentially couch-surfed between friends' houses for a long time. In Las Vegas, sex saturates the culture of the city. Even away from the casinos, nearly every billboard and taxi advertisement bears the image of a mostly naked woman, whether she is selling liquor or sushi. On the Strip, instead of newsstands carrying publications on current events, booklets of pornography grace the window boxes, each woman's picture having the essentials covered by tiny pink stars and hearts. It's easy for young women growing up in Las Vegas to become desensitized to how bare female bodies equate fun, money, and power. Many girls, even if they don't follow through on the idea, at least consider a job in the sexualized industries of the city, whether they want to be cocktail waitresses, casino lifeguards, promo models, exotic dancers, or, in more extreme cases, escorts.

Exploiting one's own sexuality is not only normalized, it's encouraged. For Amy, it was only a matter of time before she considered this new vehicle for bringing in income.

She was in a bad relationship at the time and was feeling rebellious when she told her then-boyfriend, "Fuck you, I'm going to be a stripper." She decided to apply to Little Darlings, an all-nude, 18-and-up strip club situated close to Industrial Road, an area famous for strip club zoning and close to the Fashion Show Mall, the Wynn casino, and the Trump Tower condominiums.

"I was pulling myself out of oppression and everything that was holding me down. It was a feminist perspective, taking money from dumb men."

But as she got her bearings in the industry, she realized that her originally feminist view of empowerment became much more complicated by the things she saw on a nightly basis. When a man insulted a woman in the club, she saw the power play unfold. She realized that the men she danced for behaved completely different than they would have on the street.

"If a guy was ever rude to me or tried to pay me money to do things, I would tell them, 'You can keep your money. I would never talk to you in the real world.'"

Management treated her poorly, and if her actions ever became an issue, they would tell her that she was replaceable. They classified her as an independent contractor but made her sign a contract that took away her rights to operate as such. On one occasion, Amy complained to the management about the temperature of the air conditioning in the club. The manager told her that if she was cold, she wasn't working hard enough.

“Which was easy for him to say while wearing his four-layer business suit,” said Amy.

As she continued to work in the industry that commoditized her and the women she worked with, Amy found it increasingly essential to learn about the legal aspects of the job and what her rights were.

The Internal Revenue Service provides a list of questions that helps individuals determine whether or not they are independent contractors. The list states, among other things, that independent contractors do not need to comply with instructions about when, where, and how the work is to be done; they set their own hours; they are not supposed to be subject to dismissal for reasons other than nonperformance of contract specifications; and the relationship between the company they perform services for is not a continuing relationship. By calling the strippers in their employ “independent contractors,” strip clubs are relieved of their obligation to provide any benefits or health insurance coverage, even if an injury happens at work. Amy once saw a fellow dancer hurt while performing a stage set when the pole--which had not been properly maintained by having the bolts tightened on a regular basis--fell over, taking the woman with it. The dancer was unable to work due to her injury and was forced to pay for medical care out of pocket.

One night, Amy was at work, taking a break so that she could be on the phone with her mother while her father lay extremely ill in the hospital. A manager came by and told her to get on stage for the night’s roll call, a time when all of the girls who are working stand in a line so that patrons can get a better look at who’s available. Amy said that she was taking her break and that she knows her rights as an independent contractor and that she’s allowed to set her own time for when she does and does not work, and

could he please leave her alone while she discusses her dying father with her mother? It was instances like this that management knew not to tangle with Amy.

"I was always the oddball because I wasn't the drug addict or the mother. I was just a student. They didn't want to challenge me because I was smart."

Part of the uniform code for dancers was to not wear any religiously affiliated symbols, as management thought it would make their customers feel guilty for visiting the club. But Amy blew off that rule and wore a rosary. When management told her to take it off, she told them no.

"I told them that I needed God in there more than anywhere else."

A stereotype about stripping as a profession is the amount of money the job brings in. While many strippers occasionally enjoy extremely profitable nights where they take home upwards of \$800-1,000 or more, there are also many, many hard nights where they will barely scrape by with what they earn. At Little Darlings, management only provided around 10 slots per shift, and there were three main shifts throughout the day. The slots were primarily given to girls who were in favor with the management, and each shift required a \$40 house fee payment to work on the schedule. Or, alternatively, a girl could pay \$70 per night to work whatever night she wanted. Therefore, if a dancer wanted to work for four nights a week off-schedule, she would owe \$280 to the house per week.

In a typical night, Amy would have to work hard to earn not only enough for the \$70 house fee but also to give \$7 of each \$20 lap dance to the management, leaving her with only \$13 per lap dance after her house fee money had been paid. She would make around \$5 for each stage set, and during lap dances, most patrons wouldn't tip above the set \$20 industry standard.

“They would get their temporary gratification and validation of power and leave,” said Amy.

After tipping out the cocktail waitresses, bartenders, and bouncers, there were nights when she would go home with less than minimum wage. She discovered that much of the time, the cocktail waitresses went home with more money than she did, and they got to keep their clothes on. In fact, when Amy originally applied to work with Little Darlings, it was to be a waitress. But management convinced her to strip instead, and once a girl becomes a dancer, most managers refused to let her backtrack to being a hostess or waitress. In addition, there is no way for a woman to advance in stripping. Dancers never become managers. The only way to change her strip club profession is to become too old to be a dancer and become a house mom instead.

Management of the strip clubs where Amy worked provided supplemental staff members like house moms, house dads, makeup artists, and hair stylists in the dressing rooms so that the girls would have plenty of resources available to do their job. From baby wipes and cotton balls to new shoes and outfit pieces, these workers, along with management, would pressure the girls to buy their products and give them tips at the end of the night, leading to even less money in the hands of the strippers. To Amy, it was a process of slow robbery and embezzlement. She felt sabotaged. Management had nothing without their entertainers, but they treated the girls like cash cows.

In 2011, long after Amy quit working at Little Darlings, a class action lawsuit was settled against several adult clubs across the nation, including the four Déja Vu clubs located in Las Vegas: Déja Vu Showgirls, Déja Vu Erotic Ultra Lounge, Larry Flynt’s Hustler Club, and Little Darlings. Current and former exotic dancers claimed that the

clubs had misclassified them as independent contractors and sued for back minimum wage pay from the clubs. After three years of litigation, they were awarded an \$11.3 million settlement. But this settlement was not indicative of a larger trend, and while some clubs are now more cautious of how they pay their dancers, many clubs still operate under the old model or even more extreme versions of it.

Amy once worked in a club that had a \$200 up-front flat house rate. While this would usually be an indicator of the ability to make a lot of money in a particular club, many of the women who worked there wouldn't be able to make that amount because between 40 and 60 other girls would work the same night. Eventually, with so few paying customers compared to the number of girls working, many of the women ended up owing the club money, a process that Amy says operates very much like indentured servitude. It remains up to the discretion of a club's management of whether or not they operate under that kind of system, and if the women aren't being paid the proper amount, it can be illegal.

A primary reason why many women don't speak out or sue against that kind of management, however, is because many operate illegally within the world of stripping themselves. From tax evasion to drug use to prostitution to underage drinking, the underground environment of a strip club lends itself to the circumvention of the law.

Amy remembers multiple occasions when she interacted with dancers who were mail order brides, many of whom were from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. The women were always excited, deeply enthralled in the belief that the men to whom they were married were taking care of them. They believed that they were working as a way to make spending money, but Amy recalls most of the women saying that they gave most if

not all of their money to their husbands or boyfriends. Or, in some extreme instances, she saw occurrences that were tantamount to sex trafficking. Pimps masquerading as caring boyfriends and husbands dropped their girlfriends and wives off at night in a group of other women and pick them all up in the morning, taking them home where they would stay inside the house all day until they went to work again the next night. Unfortunately, many of the women would become addicted to substances and be kept docile in a cycle of dancing, money, drugs, and dependence.

Not all cases of illegal activity were quite as extreme, however. Amy remembers meeting a dancer to whom she talked about applying to college. Amy picked up an application for her and talked to her about scholarships. She assumed that the girl was a late-starter and was applying to college as a way to get out of stripping, but it turned out that, in truth, she was under the age of 18 and had been working at the club using a fake ID. One night, the young dancer was driving home after a night at work where she had been drinking. She was pulled over by the police and was forced to hand over her real ID. It was the very early hours of the morning, and she was pulled over close to the club. The officer saw her clear plastic heels in the backseat of her car, so he came to the natural conclusion that she had been working. The strip club was cited for the transgression, but they had aggressive lawyers who successfully defended the club, claiming that with the fake ID, they had no way of knowing the girl was underage.

Although it is strongly encouraged for adult entertainers to get their licenses in Las Vegas, many girls go without. In the main part of the city, where many of the gentlemen's clubs reside, an independent contractor's license costs \$200 and there is a designation for gaming versus non-gaming. In the city of North Las Vegas, where

different rules apply, a woman can apply for a sheriff's card with a \$40 background check. However, the sheriff's card designates adult entertainers as "sexually-oriented business employees," which is something that Amy found extremely embarrassing to deal with when she switched from working at Little Darlings, which is on the Las Vegas strip, to the only other Las Vegas all-nude club, the Palomino, which is in North Las Vegas. Because of the different laws of the area, it is allowed to sell alcohol.

Amy eventually moved to Chicago, where she continued to work in the adult entertainment industry as a dancer at the club Polekatz. The club was approximately 100 blocks away from where she lived in Chicago, and she remembers a night early on in her employment there that smacked her with the reality of the work. She was leaving the club to go home one night when a couple of her coworkers asked for a ride. Assuming that she was driving them home, she was startled and angry to discover that the girls had brought her to a private party being hosted by some men whom they had met in the champagne room. Thankfully, when they arrived at the house, most of the men were passed out drunk, and the guy who had arranged the girls' arrival apologized and paid them \$700 anyway for their trouble. Amy was angry with her coworkers because the men could have been undercover police officers who would have arrested or cited them for solicitation. But the incident reminded her that she worked in a business where she couldn't risk trusting people too easily.

Over her three and a half years of working as a dancer, this lesson became true of her personal relationships as well. She had multiple boyfriends who cheated on her, and once she even passed by one of her boyfriend's other women in the stairwell on her way up to her apartment after a long night of work. She found that many of the men she dated

expected that because she worked in a sexualized industry, they were free to gain sexual satisfaction from other women.

“It's really hard,” said Amy. “Any sexually oriented business really makes a man mad. He wants his girlfriend to save it only for him. I was cheated on multiple times, but I was always faithful. Some of my past relationships were abusive and disrespectful.”

One man she was dating even threw money in her face during a fight.

“The thing is, every guy wants to fuck a stripper, but no one wants to be a committed relationship with one.”

On the rare occasion, Amy saw what she calls “power couples” in the strip club industry. The men in these relationships were very secure and saw their relationship as the opportunity to date a woman who was both strong and sexy. These couples shared their investments and money and were generally long lasting.

Amy herself became engaged in September 2012, a month after she quit the industry, to a guy who was in no way involved with strip club work. When she quit dancing, it was hard on her ego. She didn't feel pretty anymore. She missed pole dancing and the fact that she could do the moves and make a show of her skills. She had highly tuned social skills, and in the champagne room, she would sometimes play therapist, and men would pay her to listen to them. Some would even cry. Her girlfriends would laugh and said that she had no shame in making a guy cry. But some guys needed that connection more than they needed a lap dance. She once danced for the CEO of a famous clothing company. He was aggressive and rude, and he kept trying to pay her \$100 to let him touch her. She repeatedly told him no, and he tried to throw around the weight of his

status. She then told him that she preferred a blue-collar guy with respect to a rich white-collar guy any day.

After quitting, she felt isolated. She missed the social interaction and became a hermit. She missed meeting interesting people. She had had conversations with guys from every kind of job from all over the world. It was great to meet people from all kinds of cultures. But she couldn't network with the people she met because it could be considered solicitation for prostitution. But on the other hand, towards the end of her time as a dancer, she found that she had become numb to the attention of men and numb to the molestation that occurred on nightly basis. The work politicized her views on the sex industry, and while she still believes in a woman's choice to do as she pleases, she also is highly aware of the levels of oppression that both men and women experience in society.

She didn't know if she regretted having been a stripper, but she learned a lot through it. She had her own moral makeup and stayed true to it, and working made her morality more concrete. This gave her more of a reason to stop.

Visit to Spice House

It is 9:52 p.m. on a Friday when I pull up to Katherine Peters' house to drive her to work for a night of stripping. From the outside, it's small and cute, painted white with a modest lawn, basement level access and a chain link fence. It looks just like most of the student housing on the west side of the University of Nevada, Reno, and, in a way, I'm a little surprised. Who knew that such a simple building houses such an interesting person? With her seemingly contradictory occupational pairing of feminist/stripper, Katherine has been in a unique position throughout her early twenties to write about her own experiences in the sex industry. I was put in touch with Katherine through a human sexuality professor at UNR's campus, and lucky for me, Katherine and I hit it off right away. Tonight, she would be giving me, an outsider, a chance to make my own observations by bringing me along to one of her work shifts

After about fifteen minutes of listening to the radio and checking Facebook from my smartphone (I had been forewarned during prior research that strippers are notorious for lateness due to a tendency to groom themselves until the last possible minute), Katherine and I were off to Spice House, a topless bar on Fourth Street east of downtown Reno. Spice House is a member of a triumvirate of strip clubs in Reno which are all owned by a pair of brothers, the other two being the Wild Orchid (arguably the most popular club in the city, or at least the most well-known) and Fantasy Girls. On a spectrum, Spice House is a mid-range strip club with an intimate yet glitzy setting. Wild Orchid is the biggest, showiest, and the closest to Reno's hotels and casinos, and Fantasy Girls, while bigger than Spice House, doesn't have quite the same popular reputation as the Orchid. Katherine had explained to me over a coffee interview several weeks prior

that while she didn't mind working at the other clubs, Spice House was the friendliest and most laid back, and she preferred the smaller club size.

On the drive over, Katherine tells me that she hasn't been feeling well the last few days. After a stint of working every night for close to two weeks, she said that she needed to recuperate, and she had spent most of the time in bed detoxing from the alcohol and drugs that were in her system. She called a friend on the way, however, and discussed the details of her recovery more thoroughly.

"Yeah, I'm on my way to work now...Definitely no blow or drinks tonight, but I just took a Valium before I left...No, it's ok. It's totally legal, doctor-prescribed...Yeah, I've got a folder going. I'm looking for the good ones. When I go to rehab, I want it to be, like, a celebrity rehab, you know?"

After a few more minutes, she says goodbye to her friend and hangs up.

"Sorry about that. Fellow addict. You know."

We pull up to the front of the building, a two story brick structure that reminds me of some of the buildings I had once seen when I was in New York City on a family vacation. Well, with flashing pink and blue spotlights, a doorway awning and a pair of beefy dudes wearing all black. Katherine says hi to and hugs one of the bouncers, and we proceed inside, where she greets the cashier, a thirty-something woman with a chin-length, reddish-brown bob.

"Hi, Indigo! How have you been, girl?" she says to Katherine

She and "Indigo" talk for a while before Katherine talks her way into getting me a discounted entry fee. I fork over \$5, and she quickly undresses behind the cashier booth into a lacy maroon and French blue bra and sparkly white lace panties, finishing off the

look with mile high clear platform heels and a cleavage-plunging necklace.

"You don't get changed in the dressing room?" I ask.

"No, but we're going to head up there anyway for a few minutes so that you can check it out."

The dressing room is small, messy, and lit by a single fluorescent light. Not at all what I imagined it would be. I had pictured a long room with velvet poufs set up in front of round mirrors, each station lit in a flattering, movie-star glow. I thought I would see girls lined up, applying lipgloss, chatting about whatever scoundrel customer they had just danced for, asking to borrow perfume and talking about their civilian lives. In reality, it was obvious that most of the girls weren't interested in chit chat. They were there to get in, make money and get out. Many of them eyed me distrustfully. With black combat boots, black skinny jeans, a black tank top, and a white lace jacket, I was the only girl wearing more than a skimpy bathing suit or lingerie.

"So, this is where we do drugs," says Katherine half-jokingly, waving her arm in a Vanna White panorama. "There's usually a house mom, but we don't have one because we're ghetto. A house mom usually has food, but we do drugs instead."

This statement is quickly made tangible when a young, pretty, black stripper in a yellow neon thong, bra and lace-up leggings comes over to approach the girl she knows as Indigo and asks her if she wants to take a bump or blow before heading downstairs.

Katherine introduces us and mentions my research. The girl laughs appreciatively.

"We definitely have some stories in here," she says.

She turns to Katherine.

"Some crazy-ass bitch smeared shit all over the bathroom window last week."

"Ew, really? That's so nasty."

After another minute or two of absorbing the atmosphere of the dressing room, Katherine and I head back downstairs to the main floor. The club is at about one-fifth capacity, and the customers—mostly men, but a couple of women, too—are huddled in a few large groups, presumably there for celebratory events. She and I find a small two-person table in a far corner where I will be able to observe, take notes and draw relatively little notice to myself. While I settle in and place a drink order with the attentive cocktail waitress, Katherine is absorbed with her phone, which I later discover means that she is text messaging regular customers. After a few minutes, she does a couple of laps around the room and leaves me to my own devices. I sit in silence, taking in the environment. Girls move like tall, beautiful zombie dolls from table to table, sitting in their patrons' laps, occasionally laughing at their jokes and giving chair dances.

After several minutes of sketching my main impressions by the light of a solitary electric tea candle, a hulking security man with an earpiece comes by to talk to me.

"Are you...taking notes?"

"Um, yes. I'm working on a research project. I'm writing about strippers for my senior thesis at the university?"

"Oh, ok. I was just wondering."

As he walks away, it strikes me that being a woman is probably the only thing that saved me from being kicked out. A man taking notes would almost certainly be promptly escorted to the curb. As I look around, I notice the kind of clientele that Spice House draws, and on behalf of the strippers, I am grateful for the weary bouncer: most of the men are bulky, wearing plaid and striped button up shirts and saggy pants with bright

white sneakers. Every once in a while, one of them walks over to the main stage where a girl is climbing to the top of the pole in her platform heels and little else, and he throws a few dollar bills on the stage. The girl promptly descends to the stage floor and commences a show of crawling toward the man on hands and knees, then proceeds to smother his face with her bare breasts or wrap her legs around his shoulders, all with a flirty smile and focused, if somewhat drunk, gaze.

As more girls arrive for their shifts, Katherine introduces me to Mara, a beautiful redheaded girl with dark '90s lipstick and a black bikini. Mara has worked for Spice House for five years and has a wizened veteran attitude about the business of adult entertainment. Her first exotic dancing performance happened when she was eighteen years old. She and her high school friend--who was already stripping professionally--put on a show and invited over several male neighbors and friends. They told the boys to bring tip money, and Mara made so much cash that night that she decided she wanted to audition at her friend's club. She was very drunk during the process.

"That's the best way to do it," says Mara.

Every few minutes, Mara looks around over each shoulder, making sure she isn't missing out on hustling eligible customers. It strikes me as predatory. She turns back to face me.

"I don't like men. None of the girls in here do."

I ask her if she has any favorite regulars, perhaps one or two who are nice guys. She thinks for half a second.

"No," she says.

Despite her misandry, stripping has been a lucrative venture for Mara, who is the

mother of two children. She does dinner dates for \$400 with customers that she meets in the \$100 VIP room at the club.

“It’s great. I go out and get paid to have dinner, and then I come to work and make decent money. You really get addicted to the cash flow.”

She pauses to take a swig of her drink.

“I’m not in school. Most girls who say they are are lying.”

Mara then introduces me to Star, a tall blonde standing across the room at the bar talking to handsome middle aged man with dark hair. She is also wearing a black bikini and clear platforms although her lips are nude colored and she’s wearing shiny gunmetal eye shadow.

“Star! Can I steal you for a second?” says Mara, taking the blonde girl’s hand and leading her away from the bar.

“That guy’s an asshole, by the way,” Mara says when we’re out of earshot from the man. “I’ve met him before. He’s rude and will take up all of your time just talking to you.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Thanks for rescuing me,” says Star.

The three of us walk back to one of the round tables—I feel like a dwarf among giants, as their platform shoes make them at least six feet tall compared to my five-foot-four stature--where Mara leaves us before going to work the room.

As we talk, Star strikes me as extremely down to earth. At 19 years old, she is already a divorcée and the mother of a one-year-old, but she dances for “bottles and formula.” She formerly worked at Squeeze Play, a cabaret outside of Carson City, but management fired her when they saw her former husband pick her up on different nights

in different cars—often a telltale sign of prostitution in the stripping world and a risk that management couldn't take. Star seemed understanding about it. After her divorce, she came to work at Spice House as way to bring in extra money, although she has another day job that she does during regular hours. She tells customers that she's 23 so that she can work in the club. In Nevada, 18-year-olds are allowed to work in strip clubs that don't serve alcohol, but they tend to be nude and primarily based out of Las Vegas. All strip clubs in Reno are 21-and-up, topless, and serve alcohol.

Star loves to dance, but she doesn't like that she has to take her top off to do it.

"But topless bars are so much better than all-nude," says Star. "I once had a customer try to pull off my underwear and put his fingers in me, but I immediately went and told a bouncer and got the guy kicked out. Guys think they can get away with that kind of stuff because a lot of what goes on is just this side of prostitution."

Star's disillusionment with her work is palpable.

"We're liars," she says. "I'm not lying to you right now, but we lie to everyone else, even the other girls. There's so much turnover that I know hardly anyone here. We all just pretend to like each other."

After Star leaves to make her rounds, I reunite with Katherine, who is about to perform her stage set. She makes her way to the backstage stairs, and I take a seat at the tip rail, which is strip club lingo for the row of seats that line the main stage, not a literal rail. The DJ puts on "Panic Switch" by the Silversun Pickups, and Katherine struts out. Unlike most of the strippers whom I saw on stage before her that night, she has a wildly enthusiastic and fun-loving energy about her. She seductively moves her hips in figure eights and climbs the pole with a saucy smile. Her floor work involves crawling with

exaggerated shoulder blade movements like a jungle cat and performing the ubiquitous favorite strip club move, the “booty clap.”

*“When you see yourself in a crowded room,
Do your fingers itch, are you pistol-whipped?
Will you step in line or release the glitch?
Can you fall asleep with a panic switch?”*

While watching her set, a clearly drunk 26 year old, overweight, Hispanic man with a baby face sits down to talk to me. He tells me it’s his friend's 24th birthday and that they are going “to go to another titty bar after this” if I was interested in coming along. Assuming that he’s looking for a certain kind of company, I politely brush him off and tell him it is nice of him to offer but that I'm not a stripper.

“I know that,” he says. “Do you think I would have invited you along if you were?”

I tell him I need to go home after this.

After he staggers back to his table, Katherine’s next song, “Gold on the Ceiling” by The Black Keys, comes on. To show my appreciation for her art and for the sheer hell of it, I offer up a \$5 bill.

“Thank you!” says Katherine. “Here, get up here!”

“What?”

She pulls me on stage and tells me to lie down flat on my back. She then makes a show of dancing on top of me, much to the chagrin of my repressed, WASP-y upbringing. The men at the tip rail holler at us.

“They wanna get my gold on the ceiling...I ain’t blind, just a matter of time...”

“Everyone says that you’ll be up here before the end of the night,” says Katherine, leaning close to my right ear so that I can hear her over the blaring music. “You just need to get totally wasted.”

Shortly after Katherine’s set, she takes me on a tour of the secluded second floor of the club (we pass by Star giving a lap dance on the way to the stairs). There are several small VIP rooms jutting away from an empty lounge area. The lounge looks like a smaller version of the main floor, complete with a bar and the same small round tables with electric tea lights and rolling armchairs. There is, however, one noticeable difference. In the corner, instead of a pole stage, there is a clear-windowed shower.

“Nobody likes doing shower shows,” says Katherine. “Your hair and makeup get really messed up.”

We walk back downstairs past a bouncer who eyes us with suspicion. Katherine goes back to talking to customers.

The last stripper I talk to that night is Aria, a talkative, outgoing and very drunk blonde woman in her mid-twenties. She is wearing the industry-standard bikini and platforms, but she also has a black fishnet mini dress covering what I soon see is a rather large midsection. I remember a conversation I had with Katherine prior to coming to Spice House about certain weight requirements at the strip clubs in town, so I am puzzled by her physicality. I soon learn, however, that Aria had had a baby only 12 weeks prior. She was a surrogate for her sister, who had been having difficulty conceiving with her husband. Prior to the birth, Aria had been stripping up until she was six months pregnant.

“Now I get to drink again!” says Aria, who informs me that she has had multiple Long Island Iced Teas and shots of Patron tequila tonight, but by now, at 12:30 a.m., she will start sobering up so that she can drive home at 4:00.

Aria is from the El Paso area. She says she studied dance in college—although I am now skeptical of this information because of Mara’s insight—and stripped her through school as a way to make money. After college, she found that she made more money from stripping than she could by dancing outside of the sex industry. She has three children of her own, one seven-year-old, one five-year-old and one three-year old, whom she supports. I’m not able to maintain Aria’s focus for very long before she leaves to talk to customers.

The club is starting to get busy when I decide to leave at 1:00. I figure that at this point, the girls are going to want to be left alone to make their money for the night. Katherine assures me that she can find a ride home once her shift is over, so we say goodbye and I head back to my car. Katherine had mentioned that every girl who works at the Spice House is required to be walked to her car by a bouncer. This is primarily for safety reasons but can also serve to curb the aforementioned fear of prostitution. As I am not an employee, I walk to my car alone, but I make it there just fine. I rev the engine and look up at the flashing spotlights and see a stream of men walking through the front door. I think about the women I met, some my age, some older, some several years younger. I think about what brings women to this business. I think about the alcohol and the drugs. I think about the cash flow. But mostly, I think about my exhaustion, and I drive home to process my atypical Friday night.

“The prostitute is not...the victim of men but rather their conqueror, an outlaw who controls the sexual channel between nature and culture.”

-Camille Paglia

House of Ill Repute

Prostitution has long been called “the world’s oldest profession,” and it is rivaled only by pioneering and mining as the oldest profession in Nevada. High concentrations of men in early settlement towns drew many “working girls” to the area who made decent money selling companionship to the lonely men of the new western frontier. Brothels, sometimes known as “houses of ill repute” in legislation, sprang up across the state.

Today, legal prostitution is still a thriving industry in Nevada, one that has fought long and hard to exist. It is a regulated part of the state’s economy, and brothels can only legally operate in counties with populations under 400,000 people. The only two counties this excludes, therefore, are Washoe County and Clark County: the hosts of Reno and Las Vegas, respectively. In addition to location restrictions, the state also regulates discussion of pricing (it can’t be done anywhere but the negotiation rooms of a brothel) and advertising so that prices and services cannot be made explicit in a public forum. The rules require prostitutes to check every customer visually for symptoms of STDS and STIs and to use condoms for oral sex and intercourse. Prostitutes are required to have weekly checkups for Chlamydia and gonorrhea and monthly checkups for HIV and syphilis. As a result, HIV rates and STD rates are virtually nonexistent, as are unplanned pregnancies.

Like stripping, prostitution is one of those jobs that bears the brunt of stereotyping in popular culture. There are dozens of terms for a woman who sells her body for sex, and it would seem that everyone has an opinion on the nature of the work. Nevadans are generally used to the presence of legal prostitution in their state and are more neutral about the ethics of the industry, but even so, there is a stigma that follows its discussion.

Feminists seem to be torn on the issue; on one hand, legal prostitution involves a woman taking control of how her body is used and empowering herself to earn money. On the other hand, many feminists see the work as exploitive, an industry where men are in control of a woman's sexuality.

Emotionally, there seems to be a divide between a prostitute's work persona and who she is at home, and the woman I talked to was very protective of her personal life. However, she still told me about the facets of her work that were touching, frustrating, and fun. She put a face and a story to the abstraction of prostitution that comes from popular culture and academia.

Straight from the Bunny's Mouth

It seemed poetic that I should find myself visiting the Bunny Ranch on Easter Sunday, for obvious reasons. The timing worked perfectly for me: a quick Easter lunch with my boyfriend's family in Carson City, then a 10 minute drive into Mound House, Nevada to visit the world's most famous brothel, run by Dennis Hof of "house of ill repute" fame.

The drive up to the property is a long paved stretch of road, lined with big warehouses and desert lots filled with rusted agricultural tools. Just a street over there is a residential neighborhood with old wooden houses, one of which has been converted into a daycare. It seems like a typical, conservative, small Nevada town. As one gets closer to the ranch, however, there are suddenly many road signs with little silhouette bunnies humping each other. One of the other posted notices says "SPEED LIMIT 69" in big, bold letters, but in smaller text at the bottom it reads "JUST KIDDING 35." There's a helicopter landing pad for important visitors, and there's a large commercial truck with a billboard-sized advertisement for the HBO reality show *Cathouse*, which is filmed on location at the ranch.

The brothel itself is set up in a compound style, with buildings jutting off from the main building that hosts the bar and parlor space. In between the buildings, there are hot tubs (a sign is posted that reads "Tops never allowed. Bottoms optional but discouraged."), and just behind the property there is a variety of horse ranches. Beyond that, the mountains that hold Virginia City peer down over the Mound House and Dayton, separating them from Reno.

I walked up to the white gate that lines the property and rang the buzzer that signaled to the attendant that I wish to be given entry. Usually the buzzer would call the girls into the parlor for a lineup from which a customer could choose which prostitute he would like to negotiate with, but it was a slow afternoon and there were already some girls floating around for whatever customers stopped by. Also, I made it fairly clear that I was not a customer, although the attendant told me that I could have a lineup if I wanted one, even if it was just for a tour of the ranch.

I sat at the bar for a good half hour, sipping rum-and-cokes and chatting with the bartender, Alison. She and the other non-prostitute women on staff were curious as to what would bring a lone 22-year-old, female college student to a brothel in the middle of a family holiday, but when I explained my mission, they were surprisingly helpful in finding someone for me to talk to. My soon-to-be ambassador to the world of the Bunny Ranch was a woman whom Alison pointed out to me sitting at the end of the bar and talking to an attractive young man. The woman was older, had a choppy shoulder-length blonde haircut (with some dark roots growing in), and she was wearing a short, white terry bathrobe. She was beautiful, but also obviously older than many of the other girls who are walking around. She had an air of confidence and experience that was palpable, and her surety was easy to distinguish from the younger prostitutes. Because there were no other customers sitting at the bar, I was easily able to eavesdrop as she talked to the man.

“So, do a lot of the girls here have boyfriends or husbands?” the man asked.
“How do the guys handle it? I have a friend who just married a porn star, and he’s having some trouble.”

“I don’t know, darling. I’m not the marrying kind,” the woman said. “I’ll tell you my philosophy though: sex is sex, and love is love. If you can distinguish between the two, then you’re good.”

The man didn’t stay long, and after he left, the terry-robed prostitute came to talk to me at the request of Alison, bringing along a glass Bacardi mug that she used for drinking Jim Beam.

She introduced herself as Bridget, and even after I told her my name, she preferred to call me “darling” for the rest of the conversation.

“Sorry, I’m not all done up, darling,” she said, “That’s what I usually look like.”

She pointed to a row of framed glamour shots lined up in a trough-like shelf on the wall, used to display which women were currently working.

“Actually, you sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

She left for a few minutes and came back with freshly applied makeup, brushed hair, and a new outfit: a black t-shirt (no bra) and a gold sequined miniskirt.

“There. Now I feel like myself again.”

Now 34 years old, Bridget has been working at the Bunny Ranch for eight years. Prior to moving to Nevada, she had been working in the corporate world with a bachelor’s degree in computer science. She grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and was a self-professed nerd in high school who spent more of her time tutoring than being a “popular girl.” On a two-week vacation to Nevada, she decided to check out the brothel. She had recently watched a special on Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss and was fascinated by the industry. She knew within the first few minutes of her visit to the Bunny Ranch that she

wanted to work as a prostitute. She put in her two weeks' notice at her corporate job as soon as she got back from vacation.

According to Hof, the Bunny Ranch receives over 1,000 applications per month from girls looking to work there, and usually only eight or nine are hired. These numbers seem large, but as the brothel behind HBO's *Cathouse*, it's possible that the Bunny Ranch's publicity has worked in its favor for advertising job prospects. Hof looks for smart businesswomen who have significant customer service background. He openly tells the girls that prostitution is not a job that he expects them to have forever, and that they should use prostitution as a stepping stone to other career goals. He encourages them to start 401(k)s and to open Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs). Many of the girls are in school or working to pay off student loans, while others are working to support families or to start their own businesses. Bridget said that she plans to retire from the Bunny Ranch sometime soon and move to Mexico to start a cantina on the beach. The way she said it sounded a bit like a rehearsed speech, as if she was used to being asked the same question over and over.

While many prostitutes like to work seasonally and prefer to live elsewhere for most of the year, Bridget decided to move to the Reno-Tahoe area and work full time as a prostitute. She enjoys the outdoors and likes to camp, hike, practice photography, and volunteer at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in her free time. When she goes to bars, many locals recognize her and her fellow prostitutes, but she said that she and her friends are always treated with respect. While she admitted that she doesn't tell strangers off the bat what she does--she tells them that she's a "consultant"

and doesn't prefer to talk about business--she said that the legality of her work reinforces her belief that she shouldn't be ashamed of what she does.

"I've always been a very sexual person, and now I'm paid to have fun in a party atmosphere. I find the work very rewarding."

Prostitutes at the Bunny Ranch come from all walks of life, and most are willing to take on unusual negotiations with customers. Many of the johns who come to see them are lonely middle-aged businessmen who don't have time for relationships. Others are married men who love their wives but are not achieving sexual satisfaction at home. Still others are people with physical and mental disabilities who are looking for the healing touch of a woman because they have no other possible venue for erotic physical contact.

"We're all outcasts here," said Bridget. "We don't discriminate against anyone. We treat every guy like a gentleman."

Bridget recalled one customer of hers in particular who had a physical disability that confined him to a wheelchair. He came to the Bunny Ranch with his nurse, and Bridget negotiated with the man for a "party" (brothel lingo for a session of intercourse). The nurse helped the man get comfortable on the bed but left right after, and Bridget took care of the rest. She remembered the energy this man had, and how much joy she seemed to bring him. As the man was getting ready to leave, the nurse told her that she had never seen the man smile so much in the whole time she had been working for him.

It was at this point in our interview that Bridget began to cry. Alison fetched her one of the bar napkins.

“He wasn’t well,” said Bridget, wiping away the tiny smudges of mascara that were gathering below her eyes. “He passed away not too much longer after that. But I’m so happy that I was able to give him something that he needed before it happened.”

Then she chuckled.

“Well, at least now you know that Bunny Ranch girls are real people. We cry just like everyone else.”

Not every experience with a customer is filled with as much gravity. Some customers don’t even ask for a sexual encounter when they come to the ranch. Many are just lonely people looking for companionship. One regular customer at the brothel is a heavily tattooed military veteran who has difficulty connecting to people in the outside world. He comes to the brothel looking for acceptance and good discussions. Most of the girls are well educated and are excellent conversationalists; Bridget said that some have masters and doctorate degrees in a variety of fields including art, history, and philosophy. I remember what I was told when I visited the Spice House strip club about dancers lying about going to college as a way to connect better with customers, so I am somewhat skeptical of this information. But if any brothel is going to attract particularly educated women, it seems more likely that it would be an internationally renowned brothel like the Bunny Ranch.

“We aren’t traditional prostitutes so much as courtesans,” said Bridget. “We’re good at talking to a man and making him feel welcome and like he isn’t going to be judged.”

Of course, sex is still the primary reason why people come to the Bunny Ranch. In addition to oral sex and “straight lays,” common requests include the “half and half”

(half oral sex, half intercourse), toy shows, girl-on-girl shows, threesomes, dinner dates (in which the prostitute goes into town with a customer for a date), the aforementioned domination sex, and simple companionship, no sex needed. Bridget services men and women alike, sometimes alone, sometimes as couples. Her gender preference for sexual servicing depends on her mood, although in her personal life she is primarily straight. Before her career change, when she was in college, she had been engaged to a man, but one day she got a phone call from the boyfriend of the girl her fiancé was cheating on her with. She and the other cuckolded lover met for coffee, and he told Bridget everything he knew about their disloyal partners. So Bridget went home, maxed out her fiancé's credit card, then left him.

I remembered what she told the man earlier and asked if her bad experiences with her ex-fiancé are what caused her take on a different view about marriage.

“What I told that guy...it's really just a ploy,” said Bridget. “Guys don't want to hear about our plans to get married. It puts them off. I believe in the whole Cinderella story about finding that white knight and settling down. Whether or not I continue working would depend on the situation. It takes a strong man to be with one of us. He has to understand that there is a separation between sex and love when it comes to a relationship.”

Some of the men who come to the Bunny Ranch try to save the girls. Not in a religious way, necessarily, but they have difficulty accepting the fact that working in the brothel is choice for the women who do so. Depending on how often they work, the women at the Bunny Ranch can easily make six figures per year, sometimes even

breaking \$1 million.¹ Religion and politics aren't discussed heavily amongst the prostitutes either with each other or with customers, but Bridget has found that many of the women in the brothel are religious. She herself has read many religious texts, from the Bible to the Koran, and while she doesn't follow an organized religion, she is spiritual and believes in a higher power. She doesn't view her job and morality mutually exclusive in the slightest. In fact, most of her family knows what she does. She sees the job as "getting paid to have fun," and the legal brothels are exponentially more safe and regulated than illegal street prostitution in major cities like Reno and Las Vegas.

Women who work in the brothels of Lyon County have to get a sheriff's card from the local authorities before they can start their employment. They're given a background check and cannot have any felonies, DUIs, or drug records. There is a zero tolerance for illegal drugs in the brothels, and Bridget finds that most girls don't even feel the need to drink while on the job, although many will have a drink or two to relax with a customer beforehand or chain smoke in the parlor. In addition, while working, prostitutes are checked weekly by a medical professional for sexually transmitted diseases. All sexual encounters require condoms by state law, and most prostitutes are on an additional form of birth control. Bridget is on the pill, but she takes it for the hormonal balance benefits. Prostitutes' extensive experience with condom placement and safety leads to

¹ I double checked the calculations on this number. To break six figures, a prostitute would have to service 200 customers per year at an average of \$1,000 per transaction (since 50 percent of the total goes to the house), which is manageable. To break \$1 million, a prostitute would have to service 2,000 customers per year, which does seem like an unmanageable number. However, because the Bunny Ranch is in the national spotlight, some of the girls are able to book publicity events or other non-sexual means of making income. This, on top of the occasional big spending customer at the brothel, could lead to large profits for the prostitutes who work there.

very rare breakages, and Bridget couldn't remember the last time she had heard of a prostitute getting an abortion.

“I can guarantee that the rate of us girls getting abortions is way lower than the general population. People try to take a moral high ground with our work... Women in other industries look down on us, but in any industry you give up intellectual data. Everybody's a whore, either mentally or physically. We're just more upfront about it.”

When it comes to the finances of the brothel, the formula is fairly straightforward: room and board costs \$25 per day, the bartender will often get tipped out a few dollars, and the house gets half of what the girls bring in, which, even at that rate, still leaves a lot of money for the girls at the end of the day. The girls typically take a one to two hour break between customers, during which time they take a shower, nap, eat, or go on the computer. A driver is on standby to go into town to pick up food or pharmacy items such as the widely-used hydrocortisone cream, which is used to relieve skin irritations in intimate areas, or another popular product: the makeup application sponge. Many prostitutes insert the sponge while they are menstruating so that they can still have sex without the customer seeing any blood. Times to work are fairly flexible, although Hof will often set suggested productivity goals for the girls (or, as Bridget put it, he “lights a fire under their ass”) to keep them motivated.

Hof's business model that he uses for the Bunny Ranch brothel and his other Nevada brothel properties has sparked much national and international interest. Last April, he was invited to speak at Oxford University in England to discuss his brand within the sex industry, and he gets daily requests for interviews for magazines, TV shows, books, radio, and newspapers. He's politically active with the Libertarian Party

and hosted a campaigning event to raise money for Ron Paul's presidential run in 2008 (the event was playfully named "Pimpin' for Paul") and is a big promoter of individual and fiscal liberties. His goals are to put the women in his employ in charge of their careers and money as independent contractors and to create a fun, relaxing environment for his customers to let loose and find what they need.

"I'm an empowered woman," Bridget said. "My only pimp is the Wells Fargo ATM. I put money in, and I take money out. Nobody controls my money but me."

Somewhat ironically, Bridget prefers to refer to herself as a hooker when she talks about her job, although she doesn't particularly care what people call her and the other women in her profession. Most of the time, customers, as well as people in the community, treat her with the utmost respect, which generally comes in handy when it comes to picking out disrespectful people. Prostitutes negotiate their own terms, and they are allowed to use price discrimination on a customer-by-customer basis. For example, if Bridget is dealing with a particularly rude man, she will set her prices high and not budge.

"A nice guy always wins over a rude one," she said.

When it comes to her personal boundaries, Bridget only sets a few limitations on what she is willing to do for a customer.

"No anal, and no means no," she said. "I almost never have problems with a guy being abusive or violent in the bedroom. If he's ever too rough, I'll tell him right away, and he'll usually apologize and stop. If he keeps it up though, I'll grab his junk and stop the party right there."

There are, of course, instances where a little roughness in the bedroom is part of the deal. Bridget is a trained mistress and keeps a whip and handcuffs in her arsenal for customers who request it. She has become an expert in reading body language cues to determine what level of domination the customer is comfortable with. And of course, there's always her signature safe word.

"I use 'purple,'" she said. "It's simple and easy to remember. If one of us says it, the other person has to stop what they're doing. There are also panic buttons in all of the rooms, and if one is pressed, security is there in a matter of seconds."

While sitting at the bar, I asked Bridget what the typical going rate is for her services. She shook her head.

"Uh uh. I can't talk to you about it out here. It would be considered solicitation. We would have to go back to my room to negotiate terms."

Shortly thereafter, she took me on a tour of the property. I got to see the wall displays of sex toys in the red velvet parlor, the Jacuzzis outside, and, the part that I was most looking forward to, Bridget's bedroom.

I was struck by how simple and homey it was. It looked like it could have been the bedroom of any of my friends or family members; it had a dresser, a flat screen TV on the wall, a bed with a coordinated black and white duvet and pillowcase set, and a couple of nightstands on either side of the bed, one of which hosted a speaker port for an iPod. It was clean but not in a hotel-sterile kind of way. The brothel women lay down a fresh sheet on top of the bed for every customer, and there is a housekeeping crew that makes the rounds to clean the rooms on a regular basis. Overall, it seemed like a

comfortable setup, more like what it would be like if a man went home with a girl he met at a bar (which I guess the guys kind of do).

“Alright, now that we’re in here, I can talk to you about pricing. It obviously ranges a lot, but I charge around \$300 minimum for a blowjob and between \$500-2,000 for sex.”

Even with her significant profit margin, Bridget has found in her many years at the Bunny Ranch that her favorite part of the job has been the relationships she has built with both the women she works with and with the men who regularly come back to see her. She sees herself as both a therapist and an entrepreneur. The work has been satisfying for both her personal and professional goals, and while the work has its difficult aspects as well, Bridget said that most of the difficulties are comparable to other jobs.

I realized early on in our interview that Bridget was probably going to be guarded about her profession, with mannerisms like a public relations agent. As a prostitute who has worked in the brothel industry for eight years, she seemed to have developed smart answers to most queries about the lifestyle, answers that were dubiously upbeat. But prostitution is still a stigmatized profession, and sex workers typically prefer to go unnoticed in the public eye. They certainly don’t seem to want to draw pity or outrage for their choices. So while I believe that Bridget genuinely wanted to impart her knowledge and experiences, I take her words with an element of skepticism as to the realities of the profession. For example, she was reluctant to discuss her current personal relationships and preferred to just discuss what her ideal man would be like. She didn’t speak in-depth

about her relationship with her family either, although she did say that many members of her family know about her line of work.

But she did open up. She let me into her place of work so that I would have a better understanding of how it operated. And when we parted ways she gave me a hug before I walked through the plush velvet parlor out to my car. The sun was getting low in the sky, but the dry desert wind was still warm. I looked back at the Bunny Ranch in my rearview mirror as I drove away, and it looked so innocuous, so simple.

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I learned a great deal about the legal, social, economic, psychological, and emotional aspects of sexualized workers. One dramatic example was the progression of increased reliance on money as a reason to push personal boundaries, as well as the many instances of women who were taken advantage of by their places of work. I heard a multitude of opinions about the place of feminism in sexualized work: some were positive views of empowerment, while others were outrage at the amount of exploitation that occurred.

Many women were willing to open up to me about unlawful transgressions including tax evasion, underage drinking, drug abuse, and illegal prostitution while employed in their various fields. Concurrently, nearly all of the interviewees were able to tell me about positive aspects of their work including financial independence, social interaction, and physical benefits like exercise.

The women I interviewed provided an angle not often witnessed by the public. Popular media and clinical studies tend to either demonize sexualized work or view it with rose-colored glasses. Depictions of exotic dancers and prostitutes are especially caricatured as the seedy professions of fallen angels, but I found these sexualized industries to be full of a variety of women. Some were manipulative, many were hardworking, some were criminal, and some had hearts of gold. The project was an eye-opening look at the human condition for women who are seeking to take control of their lives by any means necessary.

There is still room for study in this field. The world of sexualized industries is evolving every day as technology, laws, and the attitudes of the public change. Ideally,

this project would extend to include other manifestations of the work in Nevada like escorting, luxury companions, and illegal prostitution. But with the scope that this thesis covered, I was lucky to have such a well-spoken group of women to interview. Though they were at time guarded about their private domain of work, they opened up to me in a way that I didn't anticipate, and I am grateful for the opportunity to learn about them through this thesis.

If I were to develop this project further, I would want to diversify my interview sources. One lamentable aspect of interviewing the women that I did was that they were generally all within very similar age, education, race, locational, and sexual orientation groups. In the future, I want to talk to women from more different backgrounds to see if the stories change significantly. In addition, it would be interesting for my future research if I expanded my interview subjects to include academics, medical professionals, feminists, johns, and managers to get even more varied, well-rounded perspectives. Sexualized industries are constantly changing to accommodate the tastes of the market, so to be truly accurate, new research should be done every decade or so.

In addition to what I learned through listening to my interview subjects, I learned a lot about myself throughout this project as well. As a fairly reserved 22-year-old college student with minimal research experience, I had to be willing to step out of my comfort zone on multiple occasions. Although at first I was tentative to go into various establishments (like strip clubs), I found that by the end, I was boldly driving up to the gates of the Bunny Ranch brothel and ordering drinks at the bar with johns and prostitutes. My friends noticed changes in me and were surprised by how comfortable I felt with conducting interviews by the end of my research. I also think that my writing

improved dramatically by the end of the project, and I learned how to implement methods of narrative writing that I learned from classes taken throughout my undergraduate career. Ultimately, I think I achieved everything I set out to achieve, and I'm grateful that I had such an amazing learning opportunity and the chance to impart knowledge about the sexualized industries of Nevada and the women who work in them.

Glossary

champagne room- a secluded and private room at a strip club that can be occupied for an additional cost to the customer. While legally a champagne room is still required to follow the rules that apply to the floor, it will often become a location for illicit sexual activity akin to prostitution.

dick check (or D.C.)- when a brothel prostitute performs a mandatory visual check of a customer's genitals for sores, lesions, and other symptoms of STDs and STIs.

floor work- performed as part of a stage set, an exotic dancer will lower herself to the floor of the stage and dance or crawl on hands and/or knees, primarily in a way that imitates sexual positions.

go go dancer- hired by nightclubs and bars, a typically female dancer who wears revealing clothing and dances on a platform above the crowd

house mom- a woman who is employed at a strip club to provide goods such as food, makeup, clothing, hair products, and skin products to the exotic dancers who are working, as well as provide mediation support when behavioral issues arise.

johns- the male customers who frequent brothels.

lap dance- a service provided by dancers at a strip club wherein the woman performs an erotic and intentionally arousing dance by straddling a customer and gyrating. A customer is required to keep his/her hands on the chair or couch where the dance is being performed, but this rule will be bent or broken at the discretion of the dancer. Dances typically last the length of one song by the DJ (which are typically shortened to around three or four minutes), and the industry standard price is currently \$20 per dance.

madam- a woman whose main job is to facilitate negotiations and customer relations at a brothel. She will become involved when a dispute arises either between customers and prostitutes or amongst the women themselves. She is essentially a manager and is in charge of brothel scheduling, hiring, and firing as well as day to day activities.

making it rain- when a customer showers an exotic dancer with money, usually while she is doing a stage set (see below).

menu- the list of sexual services that a prostitute and/or brothel provides.

mix and mingle- a form of modeling prevalent in Las Vegas wherein a model is hired to provide good conversation and eye candy for an event. Mix and mingle models are also hired to attend nightclubs so that the club looks particularly popular with attractive people.

parlor- the front room of a brothel where customers and prostitutes meet and talk before moving to a negotiation room. The parlor often includes a bar that serves alcohol.

the pit- the area of a casino's main floor that contains table games like blackjack and roulette

stage set- in a strip club, when an exotic dancer leaves the main floor and moves to the club's stage to perform a dance using the pole or by doing floor work (see above). This is not where exotic dancers make most of their money (see "lap dance").

swing shift- the most desirable work shift for employees in the service industry, this work shift lasts from late afternoon to around midnight, thereby getting the largest number of customers and tips.

tear sheet- a portfolio collection for models wherein they have torn out (or digitally collected) pictures of themselves from prior modeling jobs. Tear sheets are used as a tool for hiring purposes.

tip rail- the line of seats along the stage at a strip club, may or may not include an actual rail. It is considered extremely rude to sit at the tip rail and not tip the dancer who is performing.

VIP room- see "champagne room"

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